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ABSTRACT

This chapter is part of a book that recounts the year's work at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. Rather than an "elitist" laboratory school for the children of university faculty, the dual-language ECDC is a collaboration between the Corpus Christi Independent School District and the university, with an enrollment representative of Corpus Christi's population. The chapter describes the ECDC's Learning through Drama program, in which children explore weekly concepts through movement and drama. Examples include movement and drama activities related to children's books, mime, field trips, geography, movies, and math, language, and science skills. The chapter includes a list of children's books. (EV)

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Chapter 10

Learning Through Drama

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Introduction

In the summer of 2000, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC) faculty from the Curriculum and Instruction, Teacher Education, and Drama departments met to create an integrated learning program for four-year-olds. The program was based on the philosophy: "Tell me and I may forget. Show me and I will remember. Involve me and I will understand" (Chinese Proverb).

The initial planning meetings led to teacher workshops during which project leaders exchanged ideas with the classroom teachers of the four-year-olds and explained the proposed goals of the program. The theme for the learning experience became *the garden*. *The garden* served, metaphorically and literally, as fertile ground for the three disciplines to interrelate, support and reinforce learning strategies. Drama instructors took the concepts involved in the literature and science topics that the students were learning during the mornings and tied them to experiences in the afternoon. Dance, improvisational storytelling, dramatic interactive games, and music were utilized as teaching tools.

The initial summer program was so successful (See Chapter 11) that it was replicated during the fall term. The program, "Learning Through Drama," was expanded to include the three-year-olds through the third graders at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC). Despite the wider age range, the foundation of the program remained the same: teach children by encouraging movement, allow for creativity, and include as many senses as possible.

The Early Childhood Development Center

The Early Childhood Development Center on the campus of Texas A&M University-Corpus Christ (TAMUCC) is a lab school for three- to eight-year-olds. The four interrelated missions are to: conduct research, train teachers, provide model programs, and educate the children attending the school. The ECDC emphasizes a developmentally appropriate multi-cultural curriculum, instructional excellence, and team teaching. The major focal points of the ECDC include:

a. A dual language curriculum
b. Fulltime publicly-supported schooling for three- and four-year-olds
c. A school student population from low-income families, many of whom have English as their second language
d. State-of-the-art technology
e. A heavy emphasis on parent involvement and education
f. Collaborative research between lab schoolteachers and college of education faculty.

Background

Although the "Learning through Drama" program is new to the ECDC, teaching through an integrated curriculum is not. In 1985, Howard Gardner, in *Frames of Mind*, discussed his theory of multiple intelligences. He hypothesized that there are many ways in which students learn. Further, Gardner asserted that when everyone is treated the same, teachers are teaching to only one intelligence—usually linguistic. For the majority of the children in the population whose strengths lie in other intelligences, the linguistic model is not the most effective teaching approach. Gardner has defined eight intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. Teaching to each of these intelligences assures that all the children in a class will be reached. The bodily-kinesthetic intelligence is at the heart of the "Learning Though Drama" program. Gardner (1997) defined the bodily kinesthetic intelligence as the capacity to use the whole body or parts of the body to solve problems, make something, or put on some kind of a production. The most apparent examples of individuals with this intelligence are people in athletics or performing arts, particularly dancing or acting. Use of this intelligence is especially effective with young children, who already know how to use their bodies. As Griss (1994) wrote, children do not have to be taught how to use nonverbal communication "...to jump for joy, to roll down a grassy hill, or to pound their bodies on the floor during a tantrum" (p.78). Children are accustomed to reacting to the world in a physical way when they first enter school; this ability can be used and expanded. Bodily-kinesthetic learning has a wide range of application in the classroom. It can facilitate:

a. Comprehension – Physical activity allows children to understand a concept through movement. For young children, who are egocentric, their bodies are the key way with which they are able to express themselves.

b. Multicultural Insights—Physical movement, such as dance, provides an effective way to explore the universality of cultures, as almost every culture uses some form of expressive movement in their arts.

c. Development of social skills—Trust, communication, cooperation, discipline, persistence, introspection, creative thinking, problem solving, observation and criticism are all part of a classroom that encourages creative movement (Griss 1994).

In addition to these educational benefits, physical movement in the classroom has a variety of physiological advantages for young children (Jensen, 2000):

a. Circulation–Movement creates an increase in heart rate and circulation increase, which leads to an increase in performance. A simple exercise such as stretching increases the cerebrospinal fluid flow to crucial areas, which causes more oxygen to go to the brain, relaxes eyestrain, and relieves muscoskeletal tensions.
b. Episodic Encoding (also called Motor Memory)—Movement gives children a new spatial reference on the room, creating spatial maps in the mind and providing more "unique learning addresses." This is especially important as children's brains change and grow.
c. Settling–Short periods of information need to be followed by time for the information to "settle in" for children to learn. The hippocampus in the brain organizes, sorts, and processes incoming information, and when this part of the brain becomes overloaded, no new learning can occur.
d. Chemical balances–Two natural substances, noradrenaline and dopamine, are produced by the body and increase children's energy levels.

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e. Relief from sitting–Long periods of sitting can increase the risk of poor breathing, strained spinal column, stressed lower back nerves, poor eyesight, and overall body fatigue.
f. Implicit learning–This type of learning works by organizing the surrounding world, including immediate responses and reflex behaviors. Allowing children to take in knowledge through movement helps them to remember information more easily and effectively.

Young children are naturally interested in physical movement. Keeping them active helps them remember what they are learning.

Program Activities

During the school year, the "Learning Through Drama" program focused each week on one concept or skill that was part of the one grade's curriculum. The children, the classroom teacher, and a TAMUCC faculty member then explored the concept or skill through movement and drama. In these activities, everyone participated at the same time so that all the children were involved and active during the entire presentation. The activities brought the class together as a team, creating a close community in the classroom. Students were willing to try things in a large group that they might have been timid about trying individually. The activities included songs created by the class, improvisational drama, and other creative movement exercises. The following is a sampling of some of the activities in which the children participated. Some involved children in all six classrooms (three-year-old through third grade), and others involved children in only one or two grade levels.

Children's Literature

Chickens aren't the only ones (Heller, 1981)

This children's book explains that many animals, not just chickens, are born from eggs. First, the students read the book together in English and Spanish, switching back and forth between languages. Then, the students were asked what they remembered about the book. As a response, each student acted out one animal from the book. Each animal could be acted out only once. This activity

helped students become familiar with the many animals, including two mammals, which lay eggs. In the older grades, there were more follow-up activities with the book. For example, the students acted out the process of hatching eggs. All the students participated in a dramatic activity in which each student took on the role of a mother or father bird, an egg, part of a nest, or a cat. The whole group went through the process of the egg hatching, incorporating into the process details such as the strength of the nest, the use of feathers, the role of the baby bird's beak to hatch the egg, and the need for the parents to find food and fight off cats. The activity taught students about the life cycle of a bird. The children switched off parts in the activity so that everyone experienced different roles.

The Garden (Lobel, 1970)

This book is part of the Frog and Toad series. In the story, Toad tries, with little success, to get his garden to grow. Frog tells Toad that he should talk to his garden and then it will grow, which it does.

The children read the story together, and then discussed what it would take for a garden to grow—not talk, but air, light, water. In the older grades, students also discussed carbon dioxide, oxygen, germination and seeds that grow in water. Then, the students acted out the life cycle of the seed. They started out as seeds, and as they sucked through straws, they pretended to receive water, air, and sun and were able to "germinate into plants." They portrayed parts of the book, such as Toad talking to the plants. This activity enabled students to understand the requirements for plant growth. After reading both *Chickens Aren't the Only Ones* and *Garden Won't Grow,* students made the egg-seed connection and were able to see the relationship between the different species' life cycles.

Charlotte's Web (White, 1952)

Third graders attended a stage production of the classic E.B. White book *Charlotte's Web* at TAMUCC, and then did several follow-up activities. In one activity they made themselves appear as spiders, using their bodies to represent the two body parts and eight legs of the spider. They also learned about farm animals and their life cycles. In addition, they talked about friendship and the concept that differences between friends can be good.

Other literature

The students read other children's stories such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 2000), and *The Three Little Pigs* (Galdone,1970). They first heard the stories read, often in English and Spanish, and then sang, acted, and talked about them. In some instances, they did follow-up activities that involved counting (e.g. the number of fruits the caterpillar eats, the number of pigs left). In other activities they would use American Sign Language to sign the words to a song about the story. In each activity, a selection of children's literature was used, followed by an extension from the story that involved active movement from the children.

Mime

Children were introduced to mime by first acting out, as a group, things that they already knew how to do, such as playing basketball. The students initially needed some coaching to become comfortable with the process. Once they were comfortable with mime, the students picked out an activity that they would like to learn as a follow-up activity. For example, as the children chanted a short tune, students individually mimed their chosen activities. At the end, the students wrote all the activities on the board to see how many they could remember.

Field Trips

Classes took field trips around the island on which Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi is situated to discover different indigenous animals and plants. Each group used a book to identify the types of plants and trees they saw. After the hike, the three-year-old students discussed the animals and plants they saw on the island. Then they created a song about all of the animals. They also acted out different animals and plants to demonstrate what they remembered.

Texas Public Schools Week

Texas Public Schools Weeks is a statewide event. In the CCISD, each school faculty determines what their school will do to teach

students about their state. The ECDC used a geography theme for part of its program. As a class, the third graders picked three places about which they wanted to learn. The class chose New York, the North Pole, and the desert. Three groups formed; each group studied one area. When the groups' activities were completed, the class went on a "World Tour" to each of the locations. Meanwhile, the second graders studied the state of Texas. They wrote a script about Texas and dramatized all the things they had learned about their home state. At the end, the world tour group decided that they were homesick and returned home to Texas, the location represented by the second graders.

Movies

Students watched the *Lion King* (Walt Disney Productions, 1995) and discussed animals that live in the jungle. They named the animals in both English and Spanish, then they danced to a song from the movie to improve their understanding of English and Spanish words for "fast" and "slow," "right" and "left," and the names of the animals.

Games and Activities

Math Game

The second and third graders played a math game in which each student pretended to be either a turkey or a chicken. In the game, each "turkey" weighed the same as three "chickens." The children set up a "scale" with their own bodies to measure the class full of "chickens" and "turkeys."

Spelling Words

Students in each grade acted out their spelling words; other children had to guess the words. The student who guessed the correct word wrote it on the board and then acted out another word. Each word was acted out only one time.

Bilingualism

In a game called "Fruit Basket Turnover," each student pretended to be a certain type and color of fruit. Then, as instructions were given in Spanish, the students used their knowledge of Spanish colors and directions to change places along a circle.

The Water Cycle

During one showery day, the rain cycle became the targeted concept for a particularly rowdy group of students. Children choose the part of the rain cycle they wanted to be—a pond, an ocean, a lake, etc. Children with the most energy chose to be the ocean so they could crash around like waves. They then pretended that the sun had come out, and each child had to find seven other children with whom to link hands and form a cloud, after which they came crashing back to the ground as rain. The children laughed and crashed about, thoroughly enjoying the physical activity on this dreary day. In the midst of all this movement, one eight-year-old stopped and asked, "But how does the water really get into the air?" (personal communication, April, 2001). They all sat and thought about it and soon realized they knew the answer to the question. Because they had done the movements, they could take the next step of associating those movements with concrete concepts. The discussion after the activity, perhaps the most important component of this type of program, reinforced already known concepts and led to the learning of a new concept.

Conclusion

The children had similar experiences with many other activities—translating physical movement, songs, and games into more complex learning. They retained these ideas when they returned to their regular classrooms. Recognition of the gains made by the children was reflected in the glowing evaluations of the program completed by the teachers at the end of the school year. The teachers regarded the program as a tremendous success, both as an effective learning opportunity and as a community building experience.

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